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BOSTON UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

Thesis

GEORGE JEAN NATHAN AS A CRITIC

by

Frances Fogelman

(A.B., Bates College, 1936)

submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

1937

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GEORGE JEAN NATHAN AS A CRITIC

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GEORGE JEAN NATHAN AS A CRITIC

INTRODUCTION

George Jean Nathan is recognized as one of the leading dramatic critics of today. Perhaps just because he is still making his contributions in the critical field, it is extremely difficult to learn much about the man. In fact, beyond one book by Isaac Goldberg, there appear to be no biographical works. For this reason, I have not treated the life of Nathan, nor have I attempted to analyze the whole man except in so far as one necessarily does so in presenting and evaluating his critical tendencies and beliefs. To be sure, much of the man is revealed in his books since he criticizes so broadly. I have tried to point out such characteristics; also I have attempted both to state his critical views and to pass judgment on them by making myself the critic of Nathan.

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George Jean Nathan as a Critic

1. Nathan as a Critic

A. His Theory of Criticism

As always in the study of any critic, we ask first, "What is his theory of criticism?" In this instance, however, we cannot give the usual answer of, "It is thus and so", for Nathan has no definite standards. He is rather proud of repeating Cantacuzene's words, "I deal not with theories, but with things as they are." To him there is no finality in any theory of criticism.

"There are as many sound and apt species of criticism as there are works to be criticized."¹

So we have a man who desires to use whatever rule he chooses each time that he applies the critic's measure. We have a man who offers in the place of well-formulated principles a varied collection of observations. Should the critic limit himself in his criticism? Nathan would reply, "Certainly not." Should the critic ever worry about his conclusions? If he did, he would be quite unwise; for he is not following a rule or set of rules. Tomorrow he can change his mind; tomorrow he

¹ The Critic and the Drama p. 147-8.

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"There are as many sound and apt agencies of criticism as there are works to be criticized."¹ So we have a man who desires to use whatever rule he chooses each time that he applies the critic's measure. We have a collection of men who offer in the place of well-formulated principles a varied collection of observations. Should the critic limit himself in his criticism? Nathan would reply, "Certainly not." Should the critic ever worry about his consciousness? If he did, he would be quite useless; for he is not following a rule or set of rules. Tomorrow he can change his mind; tomorrow he

can assert just the opposite, and not worry about inconsistency. Over and over again Nathan points out that criticism is largely hypocrisy, but he confidently tells us afterwards in other comments on the matter that American criticism does not lack honesty of opinion; it lacks the combination of basically sound judgment with that honesty.¹

No single points of reference Obviously, then, we can turn to no definite page in any of his works to find his main principles. We can say that his theory is that there are no set rules for criticism - in other words - that there is no reason to trust in any formula except the one that says, "Follow no laws. Use your common sense and enjoy yourself." After all, he asks little more than this when he says: "Good drama is anything that interests an intelligently emotional group of persons assembled together in an illuminated hall."² or "If each work of art is a unit, a thing in itself, why should not each work of criticism be a unit, a thing in itself?"³

To be sure, Nathan has lent a tone of well-thought out ideas to these expressions, but, after a moment of reflection, we realize that there is nothing we can or will remember as particularly worthy.

We would expect that Nathan in his plan of dealing with

¹ Cf. *The Critic and the Drama* p.78

² *The Critic and the Drama* p.33

³ *Ibid.*, p.9

can assert just the opposite, and not worry about inconsistency. Over and over again Nathan points out that criticism is largely hypocritical, but he confidently tells us afterwards in other comments on the matter that American criticism does not lack honesty of opinion; it lacks the combination of basically sound judgment with that honesty. Obviously, then, we can turn to no definite page in any of his works to find his main principles. We can say that his theory is that there are no set rules for criticism - in other words - that there is no reason to trust in any formula except the one that says, "Follow no laws. Use your common sense and enjoy your- self." After all, he says little more than this when he says: "Good drama is anything that interests an intelligent emotional group of persons assembled together in an illuminated hall." 2 or "If each work of art is a unit, a thing in itself, why should not each work of criticism be a unit, a thing in itself?"

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1 Cf. The Critic and the Drama, p. 78
 2 The Critic and the Drama, p. 53
 3 Ibid., p. 9

Lack of system things as they are would have little regard for system in his works. He likes the short passages that remind one of a Sinclair Lewis novel in appearance, but show far less connection in thought. In Art of Evidence in the Night he has a section labelled Advice to a young Critic; followed by one Comedy polite and Otherwise; and that, in turn, followed by The Sabbatical Theatre. In Materia Critica, he finds it simplest and possibly most effective to have merely a running comment on whatever comes into his mind. As one goes along, one can pick up a sentence here and there; as, "There is no such thing as unimpeded absolutely clear, straightforward thinking,"¹ and "The Theatre is no more a social institution than the Pennsylvania Railroad station,"² put them together, and still have as much system as Nathan does.

B. Use of Clever Contradictory Passages

Even the individual who dislikes Nathan's unorganized procedure must admit that there is an abundance of brilliant, contradictory passages. As one reads, one feels a certain glow resulting from his handling of the language: "Indignation is the brother to propaganda and propaganda is the ruin of criticism as of drama."³

¹ Materia Critica p.5

² Ibid., p.23

³ The Popular Theatre p.14

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¹ Material Criticism p. 8

² Ibid., p. 23

³ The Popular Theatre p. 14

One smiles in agreement at the force of: "Rules, rules and Cover for more rules."¹ Suddenly comes the realization that he is contradicting himself - that he is now indignant. We may find, like Emerson, that a certain amount of inconsistency is necessary and commendable; but we want that inconsistency to be of value - to come from a probing of depths. In Nathan, such contradictions have the appearance of covering a lack of true depth under a stream of colorful, apparently thoughtful ideas. If a man has found indignation so ruinous, so unnecessary, has he the right to turn to it for his own means? He impresses us with:

"The mission of great drama is not to make numbskulls glad that they are alive, but to make them speculate why they are allowed to be alive at all."²

We grant him the keen understanding of a man interested in the vital points only to find that he himself chooses to say that his interest is in the surface of life - in its music, its color, its charm, its ease, its humor, and its loveliness. The great problems of the world do not concern him.

To an extent, he must be conscious of how numerous are his contradictions. That he realizes of giving advice the cleverness and the briskness of and beliefs them is unquestionable. By his constant use of such pas-

¹ The Critic and the Drama p.33

² The Critic and the Drama

sages, he shows that he finds them an effective way of stating his beliefs and of handing out his advice.

"To remind us of what we have nearly forgotten - that is the purpose of fine drama."¹ In an earlier book, Nathan had assigned reminding us of what we have nearly forgotten to the popular, but not to the best drama.² Unless we seek to make such comparisons deliberately, we cannot fail to find in his passages a charm of alive and easily comprehended assertion.

He seems unconcerned about how ununified and unsystematic his work appears because of the contradictory nature of No concern it. "Try to think of an exception."³ is his over system and unity challenge when he states that he considers it nonsense to say that a fine reading drama is not necessarily a fine acting drama. It matters little to him that later in the same book⁴ he maintains that no first-rate or even second-rate critic believes that the stage is the place for fine dramatic literature, but that such literature belongs in the library. We need only remember his pointing out the lack of honesty in criticism first, and then the easy acceptance of the fact that it is ever present to realize that he is either unaware of or careless of the positive absence of unity - of the absolute need for more thoughtful organization.

¹ *Materia Critica* p.238

² cf. *The Popular Theatre* p.22

³ *Ibid.*, p. 112

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.229

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1 *Nathan's Criticism* p. 238
 2 *Of The Popular Theatre* p. 22
 3 *Ibid.*, p. 112
 4 *Ibid.*, p. 222

C. His Egotism as a Critic

Such confidence points to the fact that Nathan is egotistical - that he is quite sure that he is right regardless of criticism of him. He hesitates little in his judgment; he talks of bachelorhood, of love, of marriage, of happiness; Breadth of his observations in other words he considers himself capable of criticizing in all fields. He is a dramatic critic by profession; but he feels that "dramatic criticism, unlike dramatic composition, demands without exception a knowledge of all drama, all human nature."¹ And since George Jean Nathan is quite a dramatic critic in his own eyes - enough of a critic to advise others - he must needs have this knowledge. He must be of the supreme wisdom that allows him to preach to the rest of mankind. Of course, he has the right to care most for himself, therefore, he makes the revelation.

"The happiness and welfare of mankind is not my profession.....I have all that I can do to look out for my own happiness and welfare."²

Since he, a dramatic critic, is greater than a creator, he has the discerning power to see that Richard Strauss is the only substantial living composer; that Sinclair Lewis is the most significant American novelist; that Willa Cather is the best writer.

He will hide nothing of his philosophy, which, in its

¹ The Popular Theatre p.94

² cf. Testament of a Critic p.5

C. His Position as a Critic

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 Advice possible. It makes a pleasing summary and
 he gives displays a confidence in his own conception of
 his insight. He favors:

"an infinite belief in the possibilities of oneself,
 with a coincidental critical assesement and derogation of
 one's achievements; self-respect combined with a measure
 of self surgery; aristocracy of mind combined with democ-
 racy of heart; forthrightness with modesty or at least
 with good manners; dignity with a quiet laugh."¹

For any artistic expression, one must have forthright
 faith and confidence. What splendid ground for Nathan;
 for the greatest critics, he believes, are those who recog-
 nize the intrinsic, permanent, and indeclinable egotism of
 the critical art and make no senseless efforts to conceal
 it.²

Certain He enjoys saying that the man of sound taste
 cocksure and sound appreciation of fine art revels in
 mannerism an occasional departure from aesthetics and in a Gothic
 spree.³ We are all aware of this tendency, but Nathan
 shows what apparently impresses him as a sense of daring.
 He likes to classify himself as a knowing individual who
 can stay some twenty minutes at a play and realize whether
 or not it is worth-while. He takes particular pleasure in
 stating:

"I am of a mind to announce that I will no longer at-
 tend performances save those of authors, actors, and mana-

¹ What I Believe - Forum Volume 84; p.357

² The Critic and the Drama p.1

³ Art of the Night p.34

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stating:

"I am of a mind to announce that I will no longer at-
tend performances save those of authors, actors, and men-

gers who have not made a reputation."¹

The sentiment sounds good, and, of course, he will never really want to, nor, as a critic, be able to carry it out.

D. His Impressionism of the Moment

Perhaps when he made some such statement as the one just mentioned, he was quite sincere. He makes comments in his books just as one might make them to a companion as one walked along. You speak of the stage, he set down as they come says, "The stage is not the place for consistent and resolute intelligence."² You mention criticism and he carries on the conversation by saying, "Criticism should be the act of separating the good from the bad and espousing the cause of the good."³ He finds no need for developing such ideas; he has stated them; they are his impressions - take them or leave them.

Because of this way of commenting, he must of necessity contradict himself as well as repeat himself. He favors the cause of the good in one case; in another he will have Repetitions only destructive criticism. In almost and contradictions every one of his books, one finds comments on the moving pictures. Over and over again we learn that they must fail. Over and over again, we hear how inferior

¹ Popular Theatre - Preface

² Materia Critica p. 10

³ Ibid., p. 28

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1 Popular Theatre - Preface
2 Material Criticism p. 10
3 Ibid., p. 28

they are to drama. He considers the same dramatists many times - sometimes arriving at similar conclusions, at other times at entirely opposite ones. Once he calls Pirandello the only completely original playwright since Ibsen.¹ In another observation, he doubts that he is an innovator and a highly original talent.²

A freshness of style Having such clipped, finely phrased, awake passages lends, of course, a certain freshness to Nathan's style. There is a charm to such remarks as, "Great art is often as formless as inferior art is sleek in form,"³ or "Great drama is the reflection of a great doubt in the heart and mind of a great, sad, gay man."⁴ We do not tire so quickly of facts presented thus. It is only upon reflection that we realize the lack of careful sorting of values, careful handling of principles that might need explanation that should be considered before being stated even though they have an unusually pleasant sound.

E. His Desire for Popularity

It is the impression, however, that is of great importance to Nathan. He wants to be popular. To him, "art is the haven wherein the disillusioned may find illusion."⁵ "A philosophy of life is profoundly right - whatever it is -

¹ Testament of a Critic p.13

² cf. Materia Critica p.102

³ Ibid., p.41

⁴ Ibid., p.50

⁵ The Critic and the Drama p.6

they are to drama. He considers the same dramatists many times - sometimes arriving at similar conclusions, at other times at entirely opposite ones. Once he calls Pirandello the only completely original playwright since Ibsen.¹ In another observation, he doubts that he is an innovator and a highly original talent.²

A freshness Having such clipped, finely phrased, awake of style passages lends, of course, a certain freshness to Nathan's style. There is a charm to such remarks as, "Great art is often as formless as inferior art is alien in form,"³ or "Great drama is the reflection of a great doubt in the heart and mind of a great, sad, gay man."⁴ We do not tire so quickly of facts presented thus. It is only upon reflection that we realize the lack of careful sorting of values, careful handling of principles that might need explanation that should be considered before being stated even though they have an unusually pleasant sound.

E. His Desire for Popularity

It is the impression, however, that is of great importance to Nathan. He wants to be popular. To him, "art is the haven wherein the disillusioned may find illusion."⁵ "A philosophy of life is profoundly right - whatever it is -

1 Testament of a Critic p.13
2 Cf. Nathan's Critic p.102
3 Ibid., p.41
4 Ibid., p.50
5 The Critic and the Drama p.5

so long as it makes the individual happy."¹

Expression of high sounding beliefs The average reader will consider these assertions clever, unassuming, encouraging words. He will not question their applicability.

Nathan has found a style that he knows can easily be followed. There are no long passages to wade through; no drawn-out technical discussions; no involved handling of theory. The reader can find many a stopping place, many a fine phrase, many a word that he himself might have said. A reader always finds more in the man who has a common sentiment with him - a way of holding his attention.

Interesting timely subject matter Nathan has the good sense to make use of material that is always interesting and of that which is of interest at the moment. He can thus find popularity with those who want more than dramatic criticism on the authors, plays, and theatres of the day, as well as with those who want only the timely comments. For a group desiring a good mixture Nathan can offer his ideas on phases of life and his scattered views about what makes good plays and good criticism. To this material, he may add comments on the plays of the day - on their reception and on their worth. O'Neill shall receive due consideration. Sidney Howard is making quite a figure; Sidney Howard is to be treated by Nathan. The public will naturally turn to a

¹ cf. What I Believe - Forum, Volume 84, p.358

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Sidney Howard is making quite a figure; Sidney Howard is to

be treated by Nathan. The public will naturally turn to a

critic offering such a bid for their favor.

F. His Perversity even on the Above

Of course, Nathan is quite certain that he is absolutely unconcerned about what others think. After all does he

Pose of not caring what others think not say that a good critic must make many enemies? Does he not make it clear that

when a manager no longer gives him tickets for a certain performance, he, in justification, shows no resentment toward that manager, but feels inwardly his right to his opinions. We wonder, however, at his right to his opinions.

Extent he goes to win popularity We wonder at his discreet silence about the most displeasing events in his attendance at performances. We wonder why he is so seldom ready to offer altogether adverse criticism. He condemns Howard for turning venerable themes upside down, but he does not call him a bad playwright. We wonder why the pretty definitions:

"Criticism is the windows and chandeliers of art..."¹

"Dramatic criticism at its best is an adventure of an intellect among emotions."²

Why does he keep himself in the public eye with articles in The Saturday Review of Literature, in the Forum, in Esquire? Why has he written in such a studied, apparently unstudied, manner books with attractive titles like Art of the Night or Testament of a Critic? Why all this effort if he scorned praise or dispraise?

¹ The Critic and the Drama p.3

² Ibid., p. 127

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Part 2.

In consideration of his lack of theory, his lack of system, his contradictions, his egotism, his impressionism of the moment, and his keen desire for popularity, why is he read?

A. His Recognition Today

From the above analysis, we might easily judge that the people in general would not turn to Nathan; yet we find that his books are usually in use at the public library and that Positions he most fairly well-read people have read some-occupies and has occupied thing by him. One explanation might easily be the many ways in which one becomes acquainted with Nathan; as far back as nineteen hundred five and six, he was on the editorial staff of the New York Herald. Since that time he has been dramatic critic, editor, or consulting editor on some eighteen other publications including, for example, Smart Set, The American Mercury, The American Spectator, and The Theatre of Today. He is now the dramatic editor of Esquire and often contributes articles to The Saturday Review of Literature, Forum, Current History. After all, most of us have heard the principle for many years; use the well-advertized product - and Nathan is very well-advertized.

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recognized or powerful forces in our culture, we gain for him or her a certain respect. We feel an obligation to know of them and their accomplishments. George Jean Nathan has his place in Who's Who.

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B. Public Desire to Learn Easily

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C. His so-called "human touch."

Along with his popular presentation of material, goes his "humanness". This is no withdrawn critic perched high on a throne of purely dramatic criticism, making no general Material appeal. This is one author who shares an he treats interest in the beauty of an actress, who has prejudices (against humanists, for instance), who presents what he believes about life. What he holds as good philosophy, would delight and charm the average reader. "Every man's philosophy of life is good so long as it makes him Philosophy happy,"¹ would naturally please a reader he preaches accustomed to finding great men critical and cynical. "Aristocracy of mind combined with democracy of heart; self-respect combined with a measure of self-surgery."² Is not this what you and I and our friends would consider praiseworthy and understanding?

D. His conversational, easy, gay style

Short No where does lengthy or heavy style trouble lively passages the reader. There is a spirited approach to almost every phase of what he handles. He makes his sentences meaningful, smooth, and unstilted. The reader gets the point, admires the language, reads on hoping for more:

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"It also seems to me that the current fashionable school of cynicism as to sentiment, love and romance is cheapjack, fraudulent, and silly."¹

Nathan puts his thoughts into epigrammatic form - a form that impresses a reader and makes him want to remember:

Epigrammatic phrases "A writer's work doesn't grow more and more like him; he grows more and more like his work."²

Impressive conclusions Especially if a reader failed to figure out the underlying commonplaceness of many of Nathan's conclusions, he would approve of the impressiveness of them and admire the presentation of them. "That's just the way he would talk, and he has something there, too," would be the reaction to the above quotation. "Isn't it fine how well he expresses what he thinks acting is?" would come the question. "Listen to this, 'Acting is perhaps best to be criticized not as art, but as colorful and impressive artifice.'"³

In fact, if any one characteristic would make Nathan popular, it would be the clever way in which he does point out certain angles to questions that we all at various times consider.

E. His gift for self-publicising

He is alert also in preventing the public from forgetting about him. As we glance over a summary of Nathan's

¹ Testament of a Critic p. 13

² The Critic and the Drama p.9

³ Ibid., p.106

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Frequent appearance in print works, we realize that he has been active in keeping his name in print both as an editor (since 1905) and as an author (since 1913). He is the author or co-author of some twenty-four books; so almost every year up until 1934 has seen either one or two books by Nathan. He contributes to the Encyclopedia Britannica and to leading magazines of the day. We have to be aware of him.

Statements of seclusiveness Usually, moreover, anyone who is glad to be a bachelor, anyone who withdraws from the great problems of the world, who insists on being an individual has a certain power of attraction. War does not concern him; country does not concern him; philosophy of great depth does not touch him; others, except as they help to amuse him, matter little. Ah, who is this man? What can he do? He treats everything, is up on most of the daily problems and concerns. He is just the worldly wisdom man to read both for learning and entertainment.

His worldly wisdom is ever close at hand:

"So long as you are praised, you are not on your own course, but on that of another."¹

"Broadway is honest - uncouth, shoddy, common, but without snobbishness or spurious delicacy or false shame."²

Nathan is indeed, a man to please "the people".

¹ What I Believe, Forum Volume 84, p.358

² The Popular Theatre p.41

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¹ What I Believe, Forum Volume 84, p. 338
² The Popular Theatre, p. 41

Part 3

His chief forte: Dramatic criticism

A. The place of criticism

Superiority to play writing Naturally Nathan seeks to make his own chief pursuit seem high in the eyes of

others and also in his own eyes. So it is that we note again his emphasis on the superiority of criticism over play-writing:

"Criticism, for all the notable, spicy epigrams to the contrary, plainly calls upon a vastly higher series of attainments and accomplishments than playwriting."¹

He emphasizes the need for knowledge and education in every field of human nature. To be sure, the question is an unsettled one. Mencken believes as does Nathan, while dozens of others apologize for their rather lowly position.

Greater reliability now than before Of one fact, we are at once aware. There has been a great improvement in the reliability of criticism. Nathan points out that this is due largely to the increasing criticism of criticism that is going on in numerous quarters. As in literary criticism there are constant controversies over the truth of it all. If nothing more, the critics are awakened to a consciousness of their attempts, to a self-questioning, and usually to a self-justification or improvement. As an interesting re-

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Its Criticism does, nevertheless, suffer certain limitations

limitations. Nathan feels a lack of basically sound judgment in combination with honesty of opinion.

At a particular moment, he was inclined to grant this honesty of opinion; but he soon changes this attitude to state:

"The biography of dramatic criticism is the autobiography of sly hypocrisy. It has always been that the critic has professed one thing about the theatre while he was a critic and has then promptly done the opposite when he became a playwright."¹

Are we then to regard Nathan himself in this light as he handles theatres, audiences, authors, and plays?

In one instance, we most surely must agree with Nathan. The commercial Puritanism of owners and publishers of journals forces itself upon critics. As a result criticism tends to hold back much of the writing of farce in America and probably much serious dramatic work. Also American criticism is, and always has been, essentially provincial.

"Criticism in America must follow the bell-cow. The bell-cow is personal cowardice, neighborhood cowardice, or the even cheaper cowardice of the daily, and to a much lesser degree, periodical press."²

¹ cf. The Popular Theatre p.229

² The Critic and the Drama pp. 147-8

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B. Rules for critics

Regardless of such a state, however, there are certain rules which critics should follow. Nathan, as usual, gives more or less self-confident expressions of his own impressions rather than a standard collection of bits of advice. Much of this advice is worthwhile; much is merely the assertion of an egotist.

Place for emotion, enthusiasm and sympathy That critic, he believes is most competent whose emotions the dramatic personnae do not so much stir up in anticipation, as they recollect for him and sooth him. He is disgusted with the general admission that a dramatic critic must be experienced in literature, drama acting, and theories of production but not necessarily in emotions. What makes American criticism shallow is the superficial quality of American emotions (sociological and aesthetic) enjoyed by the great majority of American critics. This fact is true in music and literature as well as in drama. Americans are either ashamed of honest emotions, or if not ashamed, their neighbors soon shame them into being so.

The critic who enters a theatre bubblingly certain that he will have a good time is not a critic. He who leaves the theatre glowingly certain that he has had a good time is the critic. Enthusiasm is a mark of immaturity and the greater the critic, the greater is his disinclination to aesthetic heat.

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That a critic must have sympathy is a mistaken idea. The critic does not need detachment and aloofness; but he must have interest not sentiment - interest not concern. Sympathy, like enthusiasm, unless it is ex post facto is anticipatory prejudice and hostility.

Importance of egotism As always Nathan must bring in egotism. It is essential for real expression in any field of art. The greatest critics do not try to conceal the indeclinable egotism of the critical art. On the other hand, he has a moment of contemplation in which he admits that when the critic ceases to have self-doubts, he ceases to be a critic and becomes a pedagogue.

Importance of honesty In most situations of the modern world, we assert that here it matters and here it matters not, but we are uncertain in a truly fundamental sense. Nathan shows the rewards of the honest dramatic critic by stating that the better and more honest critic you are, the fewer friends you will eventually have. It is amusing to realize that Nathan caters to public taste and then to see his assertion that in four cases out of five, honesty is the last virtue of a critic, and that as criticism is practised in America, honesty presents itself as a leading fault. We agree to the truth of his belief; we are conscious of the need for pleasing editors and publishers in spite of the decreasing pressure from them. What is smile-provoking, nevertheless, is Nathan's reflection that every single piece

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of dramatic criticism is a searching, illuminating autobiography. How can it be if the author dares not give his true opinions? Is it by the way he circumvents and at the same time expresses his real thoughts that one is to judge the critic?

General views In scattered passages, Nathan points out facts about morals, modes of writing, faults. He informs the young critic that morals have no place in a consideration of art. He just states the fact, gives no proof of it, and would probably merely scorn the Brownells and the Woodberrys who most seriously consider the place of morals in art.

If one is an American, he feels, one should write like an American. One should not try to copy European style and theory.

Further objection he finds to the critic who is not frank. If an actress stimulates the libido, one should say so frankly. Also there are too many critics who try to conceal all of their own defects by attributing them to the person whose work they have been criticizing.

C. Definitions and theories of criticism

Although we are aware of Nathan's contradictions, of his assertions that there are no rules, of his failure to develop adequately any theories, we do find in numerous passages views on criticism as he sees it and as others see it. He gives us a pretty definition like:

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He gives us a pretty definition like:

"Criticism is the windows and chandeliers of art, it illuminates the enveloping darkness in which art might otherwise rest only vaguely discernible and perhaps altogether unseen; yet criticism is itself an art."¹

or an effective one like:

"Criticism, as I see it, and I share the common opinion, is simply a sensitive, experienced, and thoroughbred artist's effort to interpret, in terms of aesthetic doctrine and his own peculiar soul, the work of another artist reciprocally to that artist, and thus, as with a reflecting mirror, to his public."²

In this attempt at definition, Nathan has at least recognized a body of standards as well as his need for self-assertion.

He has an objection to anything that is too cerebral, and, of course, would find that criticism is much too often a matter of brain work. He maintains that dramatic criticism exaggerates. It is not sober and balanced; it is half-sober, half-mad. The best dramatic critic is always just a little dramatic.

He finds as the only sound doctrine of dramatic criticism that which asks, "Does the play interest and whom?" How far has the dramatist succeeded in expressing himself eloquently, intelligently, symmetrically, beautifully? In this lies the criticism of the dramatist as an artist; the criticism of the artist as a dramatist comes in the question of whether the work interests inferior persons or cultivated, artistically sensitive ones.

¹ The Critic and the Drama p. 3

² Ibid., p.16

Opposition to
Spingarn-Croce
Theory

Although Nathan himself makes clear that he does not believe finally in any theory of criticism, he opposes the theory of Spingarn and Croce which is closely related to this principle.

"There are as many sound and apt species of criticism as there are works to be criticized."¹

"If each work of art is a unit, a thing in itself, why should not each work of criticism be a unit, a thing in itself?"²

These are Nathan's sentences; they might be considered as ideas from the expressionists. Nathan, however, does not go to the same extreme of relativity as do Spingarn and Croce in their belief that one must find the artist's point of view - in their belief that only the questions of what the artist intended to do and of whether he accomplished his purpose are important. Nathan does, it would seem, put to himself the question, "What is worth doing?" The Goethe-Carlyle theory of finding the artist's point of view appears to him as a foundation for a theory and not a theory in itself.³ This idea could not appeal to Nathan; for it gives the artist too much lee-way and the critic too little. After all, Nathan was a co-editor with Mencken and shared many of his beliefs - especially the one demanding self-expression.

Opposition to
inconsistency
of other critics

On the critics who praise in one what they disparage in another, Nathan can

¹ The Critic and the Drama p. 9

² Ibid., p. 9

³ Ibid., pp. 22-23

Opposition to
Spingarn-Groce
Theory

Although Nathan himself makes clear that
he does not believe finally in any theory

of criticism, he opposes the theory of Spingarn and Groce
which is closely related to this principle.

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cism as there are works to be criticized."¹

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lay only blame. Dreiser is blamed for the drawn-out quality of his works; Dostoievsky is praised for it. Cabell is unfavorably criticized for what is commended in Restoration writers; while Anderson is disparaged for what is virtue in Zola.¹ Also Nathan dislikes, as we all do, a tendency in American critics to wait for an artist not to do as good work as he has previously done and then to pounce upon him. European critics seemingly wait for the best in their authors. Carlyle's In Carlyle, Nathan finds hope - as he would view were it only because of his ability to say of the theory that it defines without defining. He calls the following definition by Carlyle the best definition that he knows; for in it there are no strict limits nor laws:

"Criticism stands like an interpreter between the inspired and the uninspired, between the prophet and those who hear the melody of his words and catch some glimpse of their material meaning, but understand not their deeper import."²

The Humanists With the new Humanists, Nathan has little patience. He believes that they are not opposed to the antithetical school of criticism so much as they are to the advocates and practitioners of those doctrines and methods. Naturally Nathan, like Mencken, would have no favorable remarks for the exponents of Greek and Roman classics, of proportionateness through the law of measure, of definition to what is often called an extreme, of disapproval of the romantic. His delight lies, however, in his confident avowal

1 cf. Testament of a Critic pp. 26-27

2 The Critic and the Drama p. 25

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that the chief reason that the Humanists are discontented and disagreeable about certain phases in the criticism of the other schools is the success in material matters of the other critics; while the Humanists struggle on as poor college professors and unheard prophets.

Differences
between dramatic
and literary
criticism

All of us tend to seek the distinction between dramatic and literary criticism. Nathan does not think that there is any underlying difference. Dramatic criticism at its best is a pleasing adventure of an unprejudiced capable intellect among emotions since the chief end of drama is to enkindle those emotions. In literature, it would be an adventure also among some human qualities.

D. The Drama

Related
definition
of art

What then is the critic studying? Since the drama is considered an art, let us find first the definition of art. Art, to Nathan, is the haven wherein the disillusioned may find illusion. Truth is no part of art, since art is a gross exaggeration of natural beauty - a process of magnification. It is a calling forth of beautiful emotions: The process of criticism is reduction. Its purpose is the reducing of the magnification of art to basic

Place of
criticism
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classic and aesthetic principles and subsequent announcements thereof in terms proportionate to the artist's interplay of fundamental skill

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and imagination.¹

Definition He thinks of drama as an art - a democratic
of drama art in constant brave conflict with the in-
telligent soul and emotions. Great drama like great men
and women is, he affirms, always just a little sad; since
only idiots may be completely happy. The artistic drama
depends on reflection, sympathy, wisdom, gallant gentleness,
experience, - all are somewhat wistful qualities. In usual
manner, he inserts one of his straight-to-the-point momen-
tarily impressive statements that leaves us rather let down:

"Good drama is anything that interests an intelli-
gently emotional group of persons assembled together in
an illuminated hall."²

Is that all, we feel. In other words, there is no
rule for what makes a good play.

"Drama is what literature does at night. It is
the reflection of a great doubt in the heart of a great,
sad, gay man."³

The Its purpose is a contradictory matter in Nathan's
purpose mind. Once he tells us of its need to remind us
of what we have nearly forgotten; at another time, he calls
this the purpose of popular but not fine drama. Drama is
like tapestry; it should not be scrutinized too closely.
Its aim is solely to fashion a thing of suggestive illusion
and beauty. Though Shaw thinks drama can do little to ex-

¹ cf. The Critic and the Drama p. 6

² Ibid., P. 33

³ Materia Critica p. 50

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2 Ibid., p. 33
3 Material Criticism p. 50

cite the senses,¹ Nathan concludes that the chief end of drama is to excite the emotions.

Present trends Nathan devotes considerable time to the study of what he calls the present trends in the drama.

On the literary drama, he lays particular stress; for the

Literary drama critical tendency of the present day is toward this literary - dramatic work - drama sound in

its theatrical self with the silken threads of literature, and apart from its purely stage appeal meriting consideration of publication as literature.²

There are two elements contributing to the increased preference for literary drama. First of all, the motion picture has rid the theatre of the demi-emotional and demi-intelligent audiences and has created a residual audience that both emotionally and intellectually is more or less a unit. The producer can approach such an audience on a more or less partly understood set of terms. In these later years, an astonishing number of plays have book form. From almost the beginning, Shaw's plays have bridged the library and the stage. In the almost unbelievable success of literary drama as a product of an American like O'Neill, there is satisfactory surprise. His published plays have sold almost like a Sinclair Lewis best selling novel. Strange Interlude has sold over one hundred thousand copies. Even the worst

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stage failures of a literary dramatic writer like O'Neill appeal to a larger number of book buyers than do the biggest stage successes of a non-literary dramatist like Kingsley.

Lest anyone fail to make a clear distinction between what is and what is not literary drama, Nathan draws lines for us. Hé shows that there are those literary critics who very loftily avoid the theatre; these people seem to believe that, to paraphrase Shaw, a literary play is anything that, good or bad, is written by a recognized literary man. On the other hand, there are the dramatic critics who devote themselves so exclusively to the theatre that they have no time for belles-lettres, who believe that the literary drama is everything, particularly if it is not good, that is written either in poetic prose or verse or that contains dialogue or more than two lines to each speech. Publishers are always veering between the two points of view; they show special favor for any plays written by famous authors on their lists who have never written a play before and still don't know how.

A play, therefore, written by a reputable novelist and published by a reputable publisher is called by literary critics literary drama. Thus almost any play - even a good one - published by any kind of publisher, written by a writer devoted to the theatre is condescended to by such critics as all right in its own way but most assuredly not deserving of the literary commentator. In such manner, we can explain

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the disinclination of literary critics to review published plays that have received healthy theatrical production.

When they do review a published play, it is usually one that has been rejected by theatrical producers.

Importance
of age of
drama

Modern critical practice also tends to make us believe that a drama becomes literature only is and when it is seventy-five years old. The foolish notion seems to exist that anything else can apparently become literature and be accepted the moment it comes off the press, but drama has to wait. The hypocrisy which insists that a play simply because it continues to live is literature is self-evident. Charley's Aunt and East Lynn have continued to live and will probably live longer than the plays of Franz Werfel. This fact, nevertheless, does not prove that the works of Werfel are not better drama than the other two plays. It took criticism years to decide that much of Shaw's drama was literature and an equal number of years to alter its opinion that most of Pinero's was. It will probably take present day criticism a number of years before it sees dramatic literature growing under its nose.

Value of
the dramatic

There is another movement that displeases Nathan; this is the French movement underway to rid the drama of drama. Such men as Paul Raynol, Jean-Jacques Bernard, Charles Vildrac, Louis Verneuil find objections to the dramatic, to the very elements which make drama a literature of episodes and emotions. Nathan who

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would probably put the need for beauty first in his theatre requisites, would probably put the dramatic second.

"The theatre, after all, is the theatre and audiences of even the highest intelligence do not go to avoid drama."¹

Need for a climax He misses, besides, in many plays the presence of a climax. He feels that, once he has been worked up to expect a good, honest-to-goodness climax, he wants that climax. In this respect, Nathan apparently approaches somewhat the Archer theory of drama:

"A play is a more or less rapidly developing crisis within a crisis in destiny or circumstance, and a dramatic scene is a crisis within a crisis clearly furthering the ultimate event."²

The comedy To polite comedy, Nathan devotes more of his polite and farcical rather unhurried, pleasant observation. The American playwright is unable to brew so-called polite comedy out of the natural scene. This fault, however, is less the fault of the playwright than of the scene itself. Usually the attempts are ridiculous because the people, their life, and their pretensions are ludicrous. It is all the subject for farce rather than for comedy. In making up dialogic

No good comedies there is the tendency to fall into a polite comedy fixed set of grooves like, "What do you think you are?" A--?" "That isn't a---; that's a---!"³

Tendency toward stereotyped form In farce we have much to offer. The farces of Hoyt, Ade, Cohan, Megrue, Hecht and McArthur, Maurine Watkins, Lardner, and Kaufman

¹ Testament of a Critic p.44

² European Theories of the Drama, Clark, p.479

³ Art of the Night pp.27-28

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I Testament of a Critic p. 44
S European Theories of the Drama, Clark, p. 473
A Art of the Night p. 22-23

are among the real treasure of the too scantily stocked American theatre chest. Noteworthy, too, is the distinction Nathan makes between the American and the French approach to risqué sex comedy:

"The American manner says, 'Isn't this interesting?' The French says, 'Isn't this ridiculous?'"¹

The epigram in the theatre is dying; it has outlived its time, its use, its surprise quality. When an actor draws himself up and begins to go through certain motions, the audience can usually forestall him, can usually make his remark before he gets both his wits and his paraphernalia together.

Morality Nathan proudly affirms that he is against all reforms and all reformers. The world as he sees it is sufficiently gay, beautiful and happy as it stands. It also impresses him that the current fashionable American literary school of cynicism as to sentiment, love, and romance is cheapjack, fraudulent, and silly. The moral order, he believes, is changing since the days of Comstock. The Moral-ist of the eighties saw harm in many human frailties; today he (the moralist) sees danger only in sex. It is always what he sees rather than what he hears that disturbs the moralist. You can say most anything as an actor and draw no adverse comment; but just let the hero follow the heroine in some inappropriate manner at some inopportune moment, and the play is in hot water. Time, accordingly, hallows the sins

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some inappropriate manner at some inappropriate moment, and the
play is in hot water. Time, accordingly, belittles the sins

of the drama.

The obscene Nathan carefully points out his attitude to-
and the
risque ward plays that might be called smutty or ris-
qué. He is very far from being smug.

"To a good play that comes unabashed into the open, I have no objection. Masked dirty plays have a horrid effect."¹

"One merely increases nudity by draping it in a transparent negligee."²

Acting Nathan considers it absolute nonsense to say
quality
of plays that a fine reading drama is not necessarily a
fine acting drama. "Try to think of an exception," he chal-
lenges.³

Quickly our minds run ahead to meet his challenge. At first thought, we tend to agree. The statement rings true. No, we can think of exceptions. Lear makes an excellent reading drama. It is forceful, picturesque, suggestive, Nathan's view carefully planned. Its scope is too great, versus the general one however, its passions too violent to make it a good play for the stage. Moreover, we wonder whether Mr. Nathan may not have forgotten to consider the "closet-drama" of which kind of play the existence has long been recognized. Milton's Samson Agonistes or Addison's Cato.

E. The Theatre.

At the beginning of Nathan's discussion of the theatre,

¹ Testament of a Critic p. 251

² The Popular Theatre p. 70

³ The Popular Theatre p. 112

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- 2 The Popular Theatre p. 70
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Use of phrase
"The Theatre"

of acting, and of audiences he makes it clear that really there is no such thing as "the theatre". To talk of "the theatre" is to talk of the Greek theatre, the Elizabethan theatre, and the modern theatre in one breath.¹ He believes that the theatre in general stands in relation to drama much as the art gallery stands in relation to art and painting. Succeeding in a New York theatre, he says, seems to be a question of everything but talent. One is surrounded in this theatre by famous playwrights, famous actors, famous producers - all more or less first-rate, eighth-rate men.

Is the
theatre
democratic

He considers it foolish to believe that the theatre is an essentially democratic institution. From the side of the theatre called democratic has come rant, jabber, and platitude. From that side have come Bulwer-Lytton, Sardou, Dumas-fils, and others. From the side of aristocracy - from the theatre designed originally for the few have come the Molières, the Shakespeares, the Ibsens. The democratic theatre lists as popular: Way Down East, Old Homestead, Experience. Among its failures have been plays from Molnar, Brieux, Hauptmann, Galsworthy, Brighouse, Chesterton, and numerous others. In other words, in the popular theatre, the best in drama and in dramatic literature must inevitably fail.

¹ The Critic and the Drama p. 78

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Need for beauty To Nathan's mind there is nothing more
and color in hypocritical than the averment that mere
the theatre beauty should be held as of no substantial value in the the-
atre. Color too, is very essential.

Killing of So far as Nathan can see, the theatre really
illusion in helps to destroy illusion. Once people may
the theatre have gone to find this same illusion, now, however, we go
less in the hope of complete illusion than in the hope of
being half-way disillusioned.

Nathan, always fond of his own similes, ever giving to
his phrase a turn that will make it stick in the minds of
most people, compares reading a play and then going to a
playhouse to see it acted, to marrying a woman and then pro-
posing to her. It is easy to see the basic truth in his
idea that imagination thrives on solitude. In a crowd it is
dismayed, lost. When one reads a play, one finds the illu-
sions of a thousand Reinhardts, a thousand Bernhardts.

"Plays," wrote Anatole France, "show everything
and dispense with the imagination..... For the fine
type used in printing which leave so much to be derived,
is substituted men and women in whom there is nothing
vague or mysterious."¹

Higher To compare the theatre of 1911 with that of
standards 1931 Nathan believes is impossible. For
proofs he names plays of each of these years: 1911, As a Man
Thinks, Everywoman, The Only Son; 1931, The Green Pastures,

¹ The Popular Theatre p. 104

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The Vinegar Tree, A Farewell to Arms. The newer plays take a broader view of life. The authors have a clear perspective, and are appealing to audiences of wider knowledge.

They are not painting pretty or attractive pictures; they are presenting life as a whole - life without grease paint.

Its standing today In general, the theatre of today is getting more and more recognition. It is up and coming, most certainly not on its last legs. Those who have turned to the movies and seen what has happened, have gone back to writing for the drama.

Disapproval of the Little Theatre Only one theatre makes its way with something an audience should recognize and condemn. The Little Theatres, according to Nathan, make their claim to conspicuity through the use of sex.¹ Somehow, Nathan appears like an over zealous watch-dog biting an unrecognized but not bad individual. Surely he could find, if he tried, Little Theatres all over the country in schools and in communities that are putting on plays that are no more sexy in matter than are those of the theatre in general.

F. Acting Defined

Not an art In regard to acting, Nathan also considers himself an authority. He firmly maintains that acting is not an art. He calls it trickery raised to its most exalted level, a combination of experience, intelligence, and great charm, not revivifying something cold and dead,

¹ cf. Testament of a Critic p. 179

The Vineyard Tree, A Harvest to Arms. The newer plays take a broader view of life. The authors have a clear perspective, and are appealing to audiences of wider knowledge. They are not painting pretty or attractive pictures; they are presenting life as a whole - life without grease paint. In general, the theatre of today is getting more standing today and more recognition. It is up and coming, most certainly not on its last legs. Those who have turned to the movies and seen what has happened, have gone back to writing for the drama.

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but releasing something quick and alive from the printed page.

"Acting is perhaps best to be criticized not as art, but as colorful and impressive artifice."¹

In all this, Nathan is not treating acting unfavorably, he has great admiration for it; it is merely that he cannot fit it into his idea of the true concept of art. Art has the quality of universality; acting is more or less sectional. It is a pastime. He points out that even Salvini and Coquelin hooted the idea of acting as an art.

Some rules for acting He also has certain beliefs about the tricks and practice of acting. Acting should not be sophisticated; it requires a skill and a talent. Particularly important is the suitability to parts.

G. Actors and Actresses

Suitability to parts The fact of unsuitability is most exasperating to Nathan. Maude Adams sticks in his mind as absurd in the part of the cocky rooster in "Chanticleer." We are inclined to mention more examples as Pauline Lord, smiling and healthy-looking, acting the part of a whining, worn Zenobia in Ethan Frome. We have all heard more or less the same criticism of Mrs. Campbell - that is - that she took parts for which she was altogether too old.

Power to express emotion Nathan has concluded, also, that we do not need to know what an actor thinks; so long as we know what he feels - feel what he feels as the character. What-

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Power to Nathan has concluded, also, that we do not need express

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what he feels - feel what he feels as the character. What-

ever an actor says if he is not carefully registering emotions, makes little difference. For this reason, especially, Nathan appreciates Latin actors; he finds that they show Latin versus Anglo-Saxon and feel real passions. The English actor cannot play the part of a Latin as well because he cannot show his emotions as completely. Let a Latin, however, take a certain part that requires emotional display, and you will know what it is all about even if you fail to understand a single word he is saying.

Impression of certain faults of actors and actresses As for actors and actresses, Nathan finds fault with their inability to laugh convincingly. They can cry, love, hate, scorn, snicker, smirk, rage successfully; but they cannot laugh without making it perfectly obvious that they are putting it on - that it isn't funny to them. He also objects to the new interpretative idea of getting a classic and hoping to put it over by doing it in a way preferably senseless with which jays are unfamiliar; they try to put in something that even the author failed to see. Almost all the Chinese plays now acted in the Orient can be acted in the same way; for that reason the lengthy acting roles are not really of such extraordinary power.

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Sorel is found with the woman, not in the actress. In America, no actress who can bring only second-rate performances

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Impressions of certain actors and actresses The reason for the eminence in the French theatre of Madame Cecile

Sorel is found with the women, not in the actress. In America, no actress who can bring only second-rate performances

lasts long merely because of love for her. The day of merely pretty roles is done. An actress is no longer the favorite on the ground of theatrical glamor and illusion. She must have artistic bravery and honesty as to her roles, and evidence of acting talent. The American theatre is full of talented clowns: Bobby Clark, Al Jolson, Fred Stone.

Though Mrs. Fiske is not a great actress, she is at least great in suggesting that she is one. Barrymore - realizing that the great Hamlet is he who acts the role not with his own intelligence but with that of the audience - acts it in this way - yet he is not the complete Hamlet. Of Jane Cowl, he says that she is not a good Cleopatra, but rather an intelligent actress playing the role of a snake charmer. George Arliss interprets Paganini as George Arliss. Since the usual audience is interested in the stories of the actor's or actress's life, the fame of Mary Anderson sprang not from her considerable ability, but from her reputation for being a virtuous woman.

The comic actors The comedian had a much easier time formerly.

Naive hocus-pocus seemed to be the main requirement in earlier days; today he needs genuine sense of comic values as well as acting ability. No longer can he depend merely on repetition; he must vary and improve. Nathan cites as examples of the finer, better comedian Al Jolson, Hitchcock, Bickel, and Fred Stone.

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stage think of the countless mountebanks who have invaded their profession and made of it a thing of jest and ridicule. He wonders what Drew, or Ditrichstein, or Arnold Daly would think. In his time, he considered Daly the best actor.

H. The Audience

Continental and American audience Much has been said about the differences between the American audience and the audiences abroad. Nathan makes the observation that it is no different from the audiences supporting the theatrical capitals all over the world. London and continental audiences are like New York audiences. The French do not necessarily flock to the comedie as many try to imply; neither do the Germans flock to Reinhardt's chambers. First rate drama in Europe has travelled the same rough road as it has here. It does, however, get a quicker start there because the theatrical manager conducts business on a cheaper scale and can try again. To the manager in an American theatre expense is the paramount concern.

First night audiences In the popular theatre, if the play is a genuine play, it will not survive its first night audience. Every regular first nighter is not in search of authentic drama; he is intent on amusement. The well-fed, well-educated, well-bred man is in the theatre to be pleasantly diverted; he most certainly does not want intelligent drama. Of course, though Nathan says that such criticism is directed at and from the best type of theatre-

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goer, it is not to be divulged to the masses.

Wants We do know, affirms Nathan, what the public wants of the audience even if some of the playwrights often miss out.

Charles Frohman has said that there are a thousand different publics. In general, there is an element of truth to the

statement, but only an element. Many conclusions can be drawn about theatre audiences that hold true everywhere; for

Possibility example, the public does want sadness, but it of fulfill-ling them wants a qualified sadness. Many of the pop-

ular playwrights hit upon what the public wants and go on giving it to them. Sometimes they must look for a slight

element of change in what calls forth the emotions, although the emotions appealed to have ever been the same. When the

author fails to make the same appeal as formerly, it is very often because he has added something or taken away something that the audience will have.

Powers of discrimination Today's audience is alive and intelligent. in a modern audience Suspense is no longer absolutely vital to prosperity with the new audience - note

Green Pastures. "There is probably not one of the old rules that cannot profitably be broken."¹

The new audience is unconcerned about the so-called happy ending in itself; it wants an ending unspoiled by sentimentality. Any theme under the sun will be accepted. With few exceptions, dramatic rubbish is quickly and finally an-

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nounced to be just what it is. Any forthright handling of character, so long as it is honest, will be accepted for even the most sacred character - clergymen for example. Once any clergymen had to be represented as all that Sunday School teachers and the reverend clergy themselves would have us believe them to be. More specific audience now

Nathan is, one might say, a guard of the theatre and of all that it includes. When he can prove that it is raising its standards; that it has something superior to the motion picture; that its audience or its plays or its actors are better, then he is happy. He points out that some seven or eight years ago the theatre tried to satisfy both the casual movie-goer and the more definite theatre-goer. As a result neither one was satisfied; the movie-goer gave up going and the theatre-goer gave up in part. The new born theatre has had to abandon in part what can be called the fifty-fifty drama and has sponsored what at least approximates one hundred percent drama. It is practically impossible to charge two to three dollars for what you can get for thirty to fifty cents. The movie-going audience on the whole wants novelty, shock, and surprise. The theatre must have more; the audience is now a class audience. There is now no use for the smut favored by the former mixed audience, for the filth like It Pays to Sin, Love and Babies failed overnight. The audience wants no condescension it wants to be met on its own intellectual, experiential, emotional level. The

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new audience does not want necessarily sympathetic characters; it wants veracious characters.

I. The Music Show

Nathan's high approval Nathan takes particular delight in the American musical show. He thinks that it has set a standard for the world in beauty, color, and movement. He calls it the one signal achievement of the American theatre. Even in this, however, he finds a grave short-coming, the presence, even dominance, of an intellectual quality that is acclaimed by journalists. It has the fault of being "too Single fault greatly the toady to rhyme and reason, too of being intelligent greatly concerned with the extrinsic thing that passes real, too wise for intelligence."¹ In his mind, the success of the music show may be estimated in the degree Chief need that it caters to masculine wickedness, dis-catering to masculine creetly, to be sure, but nevertheless, in-wickedness tentionally. The show that most cunningly capitalizes innocence is the show that most properly serves its end.

J. The Moving Picture

Firm prejudice If there is any one phase of dramatic work against it that Nathan attacks tenaciously and constantly, it is the moving picture. He reiterates that it will not survive, that it is definitely on the way out. He gives the

¹cf. The Popular Theatre p. 81

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Faults of cooking or the German ballet. In Chaplin
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Griffith's productions are merely swollen opera. Of course,

the motion picture might be improved; but so far it has re-

moved style from literature, speech from drama, color from

painting, force and the third dimension from sculpture.¹

In The Popular Theatre, he devotes considerable space to giv-

ing exact copies of motion picture plots, and they most cer-

tainly are often silly and disgusting. He defends censor-

ship in the case of the movies; for he believes it has re-

moved only the rubbish.

Possible The only really effective qualities in the
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¹ cf. The Popular Theatre pp. 128-129.

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Part 4.

His specific comments on dramatists and dramas

A. General statements

On plays We know even without Nathan's statements that in the usual run of things, the popular play is ninety-nine times out of one hundred a bad play. Such first rate plays as Hauptmann's The Weavers and Galsworthy's Strife, both prompt failures, are intellectually so simple that anyone could grasp them. Thomas' Witching Hour and Belasco's Return of Peter Grim, both poor plays, deal with mental suggestion and subconscious domination, yet they succeed.

Present The men who write plays for the popular the-
American
playwrights atre know that they can commit a thousand
artistic incongruities. The majority of our popular play-
writers are by nativity and upbringing products of Broadway. They are grown-up stage children, ex-ushers, ex-actors, ex-advance agents. They give no reserve, deliberation, whimsy, fancy, beauty to their plays.¹ Ordinarily they write plays that are typically American not something like Poor Little Rich Girl which might have been written by Barrie, but rather something like Kick-In or Turn to the Right.

On authors Always we must consider the fact that there
everywhere are two groups of authors: those who when

¹ cf. The Popular Theatre p.41

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B. On particular authors and plays

Of England and the continent Even in his criticism of authors and their plays, Nathan is careful to be clever and picturesque. Most of his authors he gives us in whort but definitely labelling sketches. So we have Strindberg as a genius with a capacity for dramatizing infinite pains. His tragedy is not so much for purging the emotions and leaving Strindberg in the wake beauty that is ever the residuum of profound sorrow as it is for ruining hope and resolution, and human faith. Strindberg superimposes his technic arbitrarily upon his themes whereas Ibsen permits his themes each to make up its own technic, so to speak, as it goes along. He did, all in all, write excellent drama, while still sane - some of it will last.

Pinero Pinero, he feels, was skilful in the use of and Jones

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deft, polite and pleasing words. He could do a scene or two that was full of graceful, pleasant understanding and pity. On the other hand, he could not go above a bound-in imagination, a thumb-worn process of thought and obedience to popular prejudice. Jones, Nathan puts into the same class with Bertha M. Clay and Laura Jean Libbey who used to inflame the sensibilities of servant girls. Nathan sees, or at least makes no mention of seeing, nothing in the fact that Pinero and Jones were among the first to feel and exemplify the influence of Ibsen. He fails to mention that Pinero's The Second Mrs. Tangueray was the first successful problem play on the English stage.

Barrie Many discussions of the drama point out similar-
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Milne ities between Barrie and Milne. They note a subtle humor, probable persons in improbable places, thin story covered with charming style, and a fund of sentiment, and imagination, poetic quality and fantasy. Barrie is ever placed higher - given the credit for probing deeper than Milne. Nathan has little use for Barrie whose secret, he says, is merely to set forth the heavily sentimental in terms of the mildly cynical. He suffers from chronic sentimentality and creates characters who are only marionettes with human hearts and heads full of sawdust and good theatrical dialogue. Milne is put into a shameful corner with the simple statement that he spends one third of his time writing weakly humorous dialogue and two thirds of it de-

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nouncing British and American critics for not laughing at it. For dialogic talent, Nathan would choose the far less famous Lonsdale.

Oscar Wilde As to Oscar Wilde's attempts, Nathan draws the same conclusions as do most critics of the drama. Wilde's aim was to be very clever - nothing more. He was very successful.

Somerset Maugham Nathan disagrees with those who believe that Maugham is a master of his medium - that he is well skilled in his business. He grants that Maugham has powers, but he maintains that the dramatist has never quite realized himself. He has all the qualities that should make him the first polite comedy writer of the present day English theatre - he has salt, erudition, taste, dexterity, invention and viewpoint; yet he has an apparently inborn conventionalism that too often manages to reduce his high talents to the level of that conventionalism. Though his themes are now and then brave, the conventionalism is there at the bottom. In other words, Nathan is pointing out a beautiful structure, but he just must find fault; so he notes the slight scratch on the door knob.

Molnar We usually conceive of Molnar in this country as a persistently sardonic, even iconoclastic fellow, a skeptic and a cynic. The true Molnar is a sentimentalist who masks his sentimentality.

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Molnar He usually conceive of Molnar in this country as
a persistently sardonic, even iconoclastic fellow,
a skeptic and a cynic. The true Molnar is a sentimentalist
who masks his sentimentality.
Galsworthy Nathan chooses Galsworthy as an English play-

wright who can write good comedy because he is at bottom tragic or at least serious. Galsworthy began with plays like The Silver Box and Strife; Then he turned to something like The Pigeon. In general, Galsworthy is an excellent writer whose last play Escape left the wrong impression. His purpose and technic is the intellectualizing of the Pinero drama. Nathan says that Galsworthy frequently says nothing; but that he says it persuasively charmingly, inoffensively and very agreeably. Nathan must be right in some instances, but remembering Justice, Strife, and Loyalties, it is difficult to agree with the theory of nothingness.

Pirandello Nathan contradicts himself openly in discussing Pirandello. In one place, he states that Pirandello is the only completely original playwright since Ibsen. In another, he voices his doubts as to Pirandello as an innovator and as a highly original talent. He feels that his ideas are, however, often above the homely plane of drama. The major portion of his work consists of a kind of metaphysical masochism. His plays are compromises with plays. His genius lies in his ability to laugh at himself (self-imposed torture). His favorite theme is the shadowy line that separates truth from fantasy. If Shaw has the most agile mind, Pirandello has the trickiest.

Sacha Guitry For no reason at all, Nathan chooses to discuss the minor talent of Guitry right after that of

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Pirandello. Guitry is a master of character sketching with lightning swiftness - sometimes in one word. He has a genius for the dramatic snapshot. He shows a great fault in the constant repetition of himself; yet he is the most exceptional minor talent in the theatre of today.

John Drinkwater All of us have some desire to be actors. To Drinkwater's aim as a dramatist, this urge is fatal. Always the actor vanquishes the author.

Clemence Dane Without stating his idea on the distinctions between talent and genius, Nathan calls Clemence Dane, hailed by many as a fine treater of mysticism, an excellent worker with poetry and imagination, an example of the tragedy of talent that tries to be genius.

George Bernard Shaw Since George Bernard Shaw has himself stated that he wants to accept the problem as the normal material of the drama,¹ we cannot object too much to Nathan's conclusion that Shaw detracts attention from his character's lack of emotion and centers it on what the characters are thinking. Nathan rates Shaw's former talents as both high and engaging; he feels, however, that the late sixties of his days brought a collapse of these abilities. The critic makes special effort to emphasize Shaw's aversion to - almost fear of - sex. He does not treat Shaw as the important, much discussed writer of drama. He treats him rather merely as one more playwright whose works he has read and seen pro-

¹ cf. European Theories of the Drama, Clark p. 473.

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duced.

Franz Werfel In a mere revelation of his own Nathan calmly states that the only young serious dramatist in Europe worth talking about is Franz Werfel. You are to take his word for this rather than to demand any justification.

Sean O'Casey Sean O'Casey has superbly drawn characters as well as a sympathetic version of Ireland. Usually (and this is a general criticism of O'Casey's work) he tries to pack too much into the final scenes - in Juno and the Paycock, for example, everything smashes at the end.

Of America George Cohan, though not of particular importance, has exercised great influence on the American Drama of the last twenty-five years. Tully's Black Boy is a living, breathing thing. The critic who sees nothing in the unimportant things in the theatre has something the matter with him. After all they give the essential lighter moments. Joseph Conrad - ever showing the futility of earthly things - the travesty that lies deep in the heart of hope - writes poor drama; yet it is gripping and cannot be neglected.

Kelley Philip Barry Paul Green Sidney Howard Nathan chooses the four - Kelley, Philip Barry, Paul Green, and Sidney Howard as examples of authors whose works have been unduly praised. None of them he believes are ever as sound as are Anderson and Stallings in What Price Glory. Kelley

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wrote one fairly good play Craig's Wife and aspires not to write Ibsen. Philip Barry shows no skill so good as that of the earlier American comic writing. He touches only the surfaces of comedy often showing a light and agreeable facility for superficial comedy. And others have called Barry a distinctive and authentic talent!

Paul Green is, according to Nathan, a weak little trailer of O'Neill. He is more like a literary man than a dramatist. Nathan is apparently among those who do not care whether Green is a good handler of local color or not. He leaves them cold.

Sidney Howard, Nathan claims, stands a cut and dried theme on its head. He can write smoothly, is most assuredly not a cheapjack, but is like a dilettante trying to mingle with breakneck ideas. He likes to turn venerable dramatic characters and themes inside out. Although there is truth in such a statement, it seems that Nathan is forgetting that the views Howard takes are often very vital ones. The Silver Chord may turn the Mother love idea inside out, but it shows an important phase of how a Mother may interfere and what a problem this meddling may become.

Owen Davis, because he ordinarily writes plays that are cheap is considered to have merit when he writes one that is not deliberately so cheap, such as Icebound and The Detour. Nathan at least is honest here, for Icebound has won the acclaim of many a dramatic critic.

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Zoe Akins started out with some promise in Papa Akins and A Texas Nightingale. She is one of the most talented playwrights of America, but she is confounding that talent with her absurd backstairs affectations. With the exception of the two plays mentioned above, she writes servant girl drama.

Patrick Kearney in A Man's Man gave promise people in one sentence but since then he has done nothing. Rita Wellman has written one good play The Gentile Wife, but has done nothing else. Percy Mackaye began and ended with The Scarecrow. Fanny Hurst has given the stage only claptrap. Susan Glaspell, though her talent is far above the ordinary, has such weak dramatic forms that her plays do not come off. The speechmaking of Ring Lardner is fine and entertaining. As a novelist, but not as a dramatist, Zona Gale is excellent. John Wexley's Last Mile shows considerable melodramatic quality and we are waiting for more. Of our comedy writers, Vincent Lawrence is the most gifted; but he spoils his full length plays by letting his characters become actors in the last few moments.

Gilbert Emery, with The Hero gives promise. He is by others classed as one of the best American dramatists and they wonder why he has not written more. Even Nathan would like more from him.

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ant popular theatrical pieces. Most usually, she is considered the best woman dramatist in America; of course, there are few good women dramatists here.

Lulu Vollmer Lulu Vollmer became a celebrity with Sun Up, but she is neither widely known nor especially prolific. Nathan finds nothing whatsoever in her.

Kaufman Kaufman is good mainly in combinations. We have the Royal Family by Ferber and Kaufman; and June Moon by Ring Lardner and Kaufman.

The Most Important: Together Anderson and Stallings got off to an excellent start in What Price Glory; but nothing important has since come from this pair. Anderson by himself, however, stands as one of the three most outstanding American dramatists of the present day. He is a literary dramatist and a success at the box office. Anderson's Winterset, though it is not always too ably articulated in the way of dramaturgy; and although, here and there, it fails in an effort to break through to vigorous beauty, was relatively the most estimable literary dramatic exhibit of the year. It is just as good acted as read, just as good read as acted. For this season, he had three new plays: Wingless Victory, (New England of more than a century ago), Masque of Kings (an old theme), and an unnamed comedy. All of them are in something approaching poetic expression just as were Elizabeth the Queen, Mary of Scotland, and Winterset. There is in all of Anderson's work

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a fine scope and an impressiveness.

Behrman S. N. Behrman is also very important today; he is a box office success. He is the most cultivated and literate of the American comic writers. His latest play End of Summer, though it is not equal to Rain from Heaven or Biography or The Second Man, indicates a flavor of mind, a skill in literary grace, a dexterity in the business of putting well-chosen words together. He shows a cultivated European view of life and an American directness and humor. Like Anderson, he writes for readers as well as for observers. O'Neill O'Neill is accepted as the outstanding dramatist.

And in this instance, Nathan agrees to follow the crowd. He considers him as the bringer of independence and courage to others. O'Neill shows that there is place for whole-hearted integrity in dramatic writing and he does this by patient labor, personal intrepidity, and denial of the theatre as he found it. For some time he has been at work on a cycle of eight full length plays to make up a study of The American Family against American background of American life from 1809 to 1932. He is not so lacking in humor as many would have us believe, but he has a sardonic, ironic, rather than obvious humor which is well shown in his comic play Marco Millions. O'Neill might be said to be trying on the whiskers of Strindberg as in Welded. When he does this, he is not particularly successful. To read, to see, to think about, to watch, we must admit O'Neill as our chief

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Of today's
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Robert Turney's Daughters of Atreus proves

drama to be the twin of literature. It is

Turney

one of the best first efforts in the dramatic

literary line that has come to the American theatre for some

time. It is the best of the new American plays announced

for the season. He makes one silly mistake by trying to

introduce anything modern.

Successes
worthy of
attention

The two greatest successes of the season were

two dramatized novels, Ethan Frome and Pride

and Prejudice. They are really good although usually a

dramatized novel is suspected in the theatre. The luminous

and tender prose of Laurence Housman's Victoria Regina has

made it most attractive. The late Elsie Schauffler's

Parnell has also been very popular and is a literary drama.

Lynn Riggs has at length found his audience with The Russet

Mantle which is in parts defective but does tend toward poetic

expression. The audiences then want literary drama, and the

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Part 5.

Conclusions

In Nathan, we are studying a critic who has no real theory nor system. His work on the whole comes in short, brilliant passages, full of contradictions, of unproved assertions, of egotistical beliefs. In the main body of his work, of course, there are numerous apt comments on drama, plays, and playwrights intermingled with unimportant impressions of the moment; for Nathan is always putting down as a serious conclusion whatever seems effective at any particular time. He has no desire to be consistent; he is eager to be popular; he both scorns and seeks the praise of others. Why he is read becomes a puzzling question unless it be that the person generally interested in drama feels that he should know about a critic making a stir at the moment. Nathan, with his gift of self-publicising; his rather light, gay, easily comprehended style, would make one feel well-posted as to dramatic concerns. He shows little depth, however; his conclusions are rarely either probing or new. Any student of the drama is aware of an improved criticism, of a clearer, more searching treatment of life in the newer plays, and of a catering to public opinion. He shows a cleverness in phrasing his beliefs and opinions that probably make

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him appear greater than he truly is. It seems that of Nathan we might say that he is a clever critic but not a distinctive one, a popular critic but not a great one. He is important today; of tomorrow, there is grave doubt. A critic with an alert, quick mind could, it would seem, easily fill Nathan's place once he has left it.

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SUMMARY

George Jean Nathan as a critic fails to use any definite theory of criticism. There is a lack of definite standards; most of the work is a collection of observations scattered everywhere with no single points of reference for either dramatic or critical theories. On the whole, he makes little use of system; his works, made up of short, broken passages - often unrelated - are a clear evasion of system.

He is always using brilliant contradictory passages which serve as a cover for a lack of true depth and as a means of giving advice and beliefs. He shows in these inconsistent parts that to him both system and unity are unnecessary.

As a critic, he is an egotist. In the breadth of his observations, in the advice he gives, in the cock-sure mannerisms he displays, we see the sure marks of egotism.

He is subject to impressionism of the moment - setting down observations as they come, repeating and contradicting himself, and at the same time displaying a pleasing freshness of style.

He does desire popularity. Toward this aim, he expresses high-sounding, carefully phrased beliefs. His style is easily read and understood; his subject matter is inter-

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Even on this matter, he must show perversity. He pretends not to care what others think, yet he goes far to win popularity.

Why Nathan is read In consideration of his lack of theory, his lack of system, his contradictions, his egotism, his impressionism of the moment, and his desire for popularity, why is he read? We may answer this question by pointing out his recognition today - the positions he occupies and has occupied, the presence in Who's Who, the rank as a leading critic. There is, furthermore, the public desire to learn easily about drama in general and about a popular critic. He shows a so-called "human touch" in the philosophy he lays claim to. Always his style is conversational, easy, gay. He is a master of short, lively passages, of epigrammatic phrases, of impressive conclusions. And he does possess a gift for self-publicizing. His advertisement is in the form of frequent appearances in print, statements of seclusiveness, and an air of worldly wisdom.

His chief forte: Of course, his chief forte is dramatic criticism. He gives to criticism a high place. It is superior to play writing; it is more reliable now than ever before in spite of some limitations.

There are rules for critics that assign a place to emotion, enthusiasm and sympathy - that state the importance of egotism and of honesty - and that give a few general sug-

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gestions.

In the consideration of definitions and theories of criticism, Nathan gives his own view, contrasts it with the Spingarn-Croce theory, and opposes the inconsistency of other critics. He approves of Carlyle and laughs at the Humanists. He also distinguishes between literary and dramatic criticism.

The study of the drama includes a definition of art with the place of criticism in art. It tries to define drama, to state its purpose, to show its present trends, particularly literary drama. The importance of the age of drama is discussed. The value of the dramatic and the need for a climax are considered. The lack of good polite comedy and a tendency toward stereotyped form is pointed out. Morality has changed; a definite place is assigned to the obscene and the risqué. In regard to the acting quality of plays, Nathan's view is rather different from the general one.

Nathan, in dealing with the theatre, discusses the use of the phrase "the theatre"; explains the democratic theatre; speaks of the need for beauty and color in the theatre. He believes that the theatre kills illusion. He finds, too, that the theatre of today has higher standards, and is climbing, is not on its last legs. He disapproves of the "Little Theatres", and lays stress on the sex theme.

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In viewing them, he mentions suitability to parts and the power to express emotion, the Latin power being superior to the Anglo-Saxon; then he gives his impressions of certain actors and actresses.

Audiences are no different in America than in foreign countries. First-night audiences are entertainment seekers. The wants of audiences are usually known and can usually be fulfilled. A modern audience is discriminative, intelligent, and is more specific than formerly.

Nathan has high approval for the music show, finding that its chief fault is one of being intelligent, that its chief need is the catering to masculine wickedness.

Nathan is firmly prejudiced against the moving picture; he takes care to point out its faults, noting a few good points, and smiling tolerantly at its audience.

His specific comments on dramatists and dramas	He gives direct criticism by having a number of general statements on plays, on present American playwrights, on authors everywhere.
---	--

Then he considers particular authors and plays of England and the continent as well as of America - considering here the general run, the most important, the plays of today, and successes attracting attention. Here, too, he is self-confident, often in agreement, very often in disagreement with other critics.

Conclusions:

We do not think of Nathan as a particularly great critic.

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Nathan has high approval for the music show, finding that its chief fault is one of being intelligent, that its chief need is the catering to masculine weaknesses. Nathan is firmly prejudiced against the moving picture;

he takes care to point out its faults, noting a few good points, and smiling tolerantly at its audience.

He gives direct criticism by having a number of general statements on plays, on present American playwrights, on authors everywhere, and dramatic comments on his specific

Then he considers particular authors and plays of England and the continent as well as of America - considering here the general run, the most important, the plays of today, and successes attracting attention. Here, too, he is self-confident, often in agreement, very often in disagreement with other critics.

Conclusions:

We do not think of Nathan as a particularly great critic.

We do remember his charm, his pompousness, his timeliness, and his great variety of subject. We enjoy him, but we do not necessarily recommend him.

62.
We do remember his charm, his pomposity, his timeliness,
and his great variety of subject. We enjoy him, but we do
not necessarily recommend him.

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